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THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN MARTIN

Lonnie E. Maness

On October 21, 1823, Weakley County was formed and named for Robert Weakley by act of the Tennessee General Assembly.¹ Some of the early settlers in the county included Reuben Edmonston and his brother-in-law John Bradshaw and family. They settled on Mud Creek which was some six miles west of Dresden. Henry and John Stevenson, John F. Cavitt, John Rogers, Benjamin Farmer, the Webbs, and the Killebrews settled in the northeast part of the county. Some of the first settlers in the northwest section of the county were Alexander Paschall, his son Jesse M. Paschall, Peter Mooney, John and George Horton, and Samuel Majors. One of the early settlers to the county was none other than the famous Colonel David Crockett, who eventually served Tennessee in the national House of Representatives and who was to die at the Alamo fighting for the independence of Texas.²

As the years passed the county grew tremendously, both in people and in wealth. By the time of the War for Southern Independence, Weakley County was populous enough to furnish eleven companies of men for the Confederacy; it also furnished four companies for the Union army.³ By the late 1860s the Civil War was over and the county was showing much growth.

The town of Martin, which was known as Frost Station, was founded in 1873 on the site where the Illinois Central and the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railroads intersected.⁴ Colonel G. W. Martin established a sawmill close to the intersection, and Martin soon began to mushroom. This mill furnished the lumber that was needed for the building boom. Soon a hotel was constructed, other business establishments, and private dwellings. A public school building was erected, and then there followed the construction of several church buildings.⁵ In 1873 the town had few citizens; by 1878 there were 710 people; by 1873 the figure had reached 1200, and by 1910 there were some 3000 people living in Martin.⁶

The pioneers and early settlers of Martin carved a town out of a wilderness. And wherever new communities sprang up the civilizing hand of religion was not far behind. This was the case with Martin. In 1874 the Church of Christ was organized through the efforts of William Fall. He canvassed the western part of the county and discovered that seven members of the church lived in the vicinity of Martin. These were B. T. Bondurant of Sharon, J. H. Westmoreland of Gardner, W. J. Burchard of Martin, Mrs. Evans of Sharon, and Mr. Fall, his wife and daughter, who lived seven miles southeast of Martin. Through Mr. Fall's efforts a meeting was arranged in which J. H. Roulhac of Union City did the preaching. Several persons were added to the faithful saints due to his efforts, and a congregation was organized.⁷

From time to time, between 1874 and 1879, Roulhac preached and held meetings for the Martin congregation, and this led to further growth, both spiritually and in numbers. Among those added to the church were Mrs. W. J. Burchard, Miss Jennie Dibrell, G. W. Dibrell, M. M. Burchard, and Mr. and Mrs. Joe Glass.⁸ Undoubtedly his efforts bore fruit subsequently in many who heard his sermons. In the meantime Brother Fall furnished most of the leadership for the new congregation; he saw that services were conducted each Lord's day.⁹ The congregation continued to grow. In 1882 or 1883 the church constructed a neat brick building on the corner of Oxford and Olive Streets¹⁰ where the

congregation met continuously until 1960 when it moved into its new and much larger building at the corner of Oxford and Mill Streets.¹¹

In the meantime other evangelists such as David Lipscomb and E. G. Sewell of Nashville, Smithson, the blind man of upper Cumberland, W. H. Sutton of Sparta, and others held meetings for the church during its early years. It was not uncommon for these meetings, one or two each year, to last from ten days to two weeks. Among those added to the church due to David Lipscomb's efforts were D. Mann and Douglas Dibrell; J. H. Ward, and Mrs. L. Ward, and W. E. Jeffress were influenced to obey the gospel by E. G. Sewell, and the splendid work of the other evangelists did not go unrewarded.¹² Thus it was due to the work of these men and the zealous efforts of the local congregation that the work in Martin continued to grow and prosper during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By 1910 the church building was in bad need of repair; besides the church had expanded to the point where more room was needed for the services. Thus, it was decided to tear down the old structure and build a new meeting house. The result of this decision was the construction of one of the "neatest, most modern and convenient houses in town. It was heated with a hot air furnace, lighted by electricity and has a baptistry in the floor."¹³ This building, with some repairs, was used by the Martin congregation until it moved into the new structure at 233 Oxford Street in 1960.

Over the years from 1874 until 1910 many men who were famous in the brotherhood and others who would become famous labored with the Martin congregation either as regular ministers or by working with the congregation in revival meetings. By 1910 the church had grown greatly, but it would experience even more phenomenal growth in the years that lay ahead.

In 1910 Martin was a city of 3,000;¹⁴ today it is a city of over 8,000, excluding the 5,000 or so students that attend the University of Tennessee at Martin. For most of the years since 1910 Martin was a center for agriculture, but today there is a much better balance between agriculture and industry. Also, as in 1910, Martin continues to be an important center for education with the University of Tennessee at Martin displacing McFerrin Institute and Hall-Moody.¹⁵

The Church of Christ has shared in this growth. In 1910 the membership was small, consisting of approximately 130 persons; today it is not uncommon for the church to have close to 500 people in attendance for Sunday morning worship.¹⁶ And over the years this congregation has aided several sister congregations financially and in other ways, a function that is not unimportant in the brotherhood.¹⁷

How do we account for this phenomenal growth? In part, one may assume, because of the continuous influx of people into the city who already belonged to the church. They immediately affiliated with the local congregation. Also many who came to Martin and were not members of any faith were influenced to make the decision for the Lord and were added to the church. Then it was not unknown for some members of other faiths to be brought into the brotherhood.¹⁸

Much of this good work was accomplished through the agency of those who labored with the congregation as ministers or who worked with the congregation in revival meetings. One of the most noted early evangelists that fell into the latter category was A. B. Lipscomb who held two week meetings in August

of both 1913 and 1915. His efforts led to thirteen souls being added to the church in 1913 and an additional seven in 1915. Among those that responded were C. B. Bowden, Turner Bowden, Neil Bowden, Mrs. Flossie Ennis, Francis Ennis, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Wharton, Artelle Johnson, Mr. Oscar Johnson, and Mrs. Mina Lee. Brother Liscomb's was a powerful voice within the brotherhood, and his memory is still an inspiration to good work.¹⁹

Then in June of 1916 and 1917 N. B. Hardeman held revival meetings in which eleven persons were baptized into the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection to arise new persons. Among those who made the decision for Christ were Harry Walters, Miss Sophia Poyner, Miss Theo Poyner, Howard Poyner Millard and James D. Roberts, Mrs. Edith Carney, and Gladys Hatler. It was reported by the congregation that Brother Hardeman was the "finest teacher in the brotherhood." The brethren also believed that Hardeman had the great ability to deliver God's Word in all of its simplicity so that the most unlettered could understand the message. The church was strengthened as a result of his efforts.²⁰ He, like A. B. Lipscomb, came to wield great influence within the brotherhood.²¹

Many others have also served the congregation such as A. O. Colley, Joe S. Warlick, J. W. Dunn, Jno. E. Dunn (who baptized Lillian B. Cox), F. B. Srygley, H. W. Trice, Charley Taylor, G. C. Brewer, F. W. Smith, C. W. Stubblefield, F. L. Paisley, I. C. Haskins, T. B. Larimore, A. G. Freed, G. W. Morris, S. P. Pittman, Hall Calhoun (who baptized Verna Cox who has now been a member of the church for over 80 years), C. B. Douthitt, R. R. Brooks, H. T. Copeland, H. A. Dixon, Foy E. Wallis, Brother McGoy, D. Ellis Walker, Ewing Wray, J. E. Green, Alonzo Williams, James Falkner, Jesse Wilcoxson, Virgil Trout, Basil Overton, Price Billingsley, David D. Davison, Glenn L. Wallace, James G. Pounders, and Lee Brown.²² Many of these men labored with the church in revival meetings, from which much good was accomplished by the spiritual uplifting of the saints. Also many heard the Word, obeyed the gospel, and were added to the church. Needless to say, the congregation was spiritually strengthened by the work of these men.

During the 1930s Brother H. Leo Boles preached for the congregation, a man who served his God, the church, and his fellow men with zeal and distinction throughout his long and productive life. He was a long-time professor at David Lipscomb College and was for years president of that institution. His volumes in the *New Testament Commentaries* include *Matthew*, *Luke*, and *Acts*, and he was a long-time contributor to *The Gospel Advocate*. His work with the congregation was productive of much good. Among those that obeyed the gospel were John Brockwell, Billie Lou and Ellie Ree Banks, Mrs. Byron Foy, and Frank Warmath.²³ Brother Boles, like N. B. Hardeman and A. B. Lipscomb, has had a great influence within the brotherhood as a writer, as a teacher, and as a great gospel preacher.

Thus far attention has been centered mainly on the good works which resulted from revival meetings. Let's take a look at two men who have labored with the local congregation as regular ministers. These men are E. P. Smith and J. R. Stockard. Brother Smith was born on April 29, 1875, near Newbern, Tennessee. After having attended the public schools of Gibson County, the West Kentucky Normal School in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, he taught public school at Sharon, Greenfield, and was Superintendent of Rutherford High School for six years before coming to Martin and becoming Superintendent of the Martin City Schools. It is reported that he was well liked by students and parents and "won a legion of friends all over the

city."²⁴ During this period he and his wife were associated with the local congregation, and he was asked to preach on the first and third Sundays of each month. Smith consented and performed this service for a number of years, from about 1911 to 1924; in subsequent years he spoke from time to time for the congregation.²⁵

Brother Smith was a fine but unpretentious speaker, knew his Bible well, and could command the attention of his listeners. Due to his efforts many people responded to the gospel call. Among those that did so were Roy Brasfield, Ola Faye Brasfield, Herbert Brasfield, Mrs. Brooksie Brasfield, Carl F. Bowden, Sarah Alice Hardeman, Herbert Bowden, D. G. Pentecost, Mrs. Mary Pentecost, A. C. Burchard, and Mrs. Violet Fuqua. Brother Smith did a fine work in Martin and was "greatly esteemed by all the membership with whom he takes an active part in the spiritual and missionary affairs of the church."²⁶

For many years J. R. Stockard and his wife lived in Martin and were associated with the local congregation. He taught public school for many years in various places throughout the west Tennessee area.²⁷ Brother Stockard was a well educated, knowledgeable man and Bible scholar who worked diligently with the congregation in two capacities, as a regular member and as minister for the church during the late 1940s. As a result of his teaching and powerful sermons the lives of many people have been greatly influenced, including many who obeyed the gospel. Those that did so included Beverly Dawson, Mrs. Pat White, Dorothy Jolly, Ernest Lee Maness, Tyler Yates, Ed Hutchens, Mrs. Agnes Hutchens, Martha Jean Hutchens, Sue Summers, Clyde Sadler, Joan Tuck, Corine Grogan, and Woodrow Grooms. Brother Stockard, who now lives in Bradford, Tennessee, is highly respected within the brotherhood for his fine work.²⁸

As the years went by the church continued to grow because of the efforts of the many evangelists who worked with the Martin brethren and also because of the zealous nature of many of those in the local congregation. The current leadership of the church consists of the following elders: Mac Buckley, Cleo Dawson, Fred Hatler, H. A. Maxey, Gerald Rachels, Ed N. White, and James P. Wright. The deacons are: Harold Johnson, Ed Hutchens, Larry Kelly, Lonnie Maness, Aubrey Needham, Charles Stafford, Van Swaim, John Williams, and Dessell Wright. Billy R. Newby has been the minister of the congregation since 1965 and is doing an outstanding job of preaching the Word of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.²⁹ The Martin Church of Christ has been and will continue to be a part of the growth and development of this community.

FOOTNOTES

1. **The History of Tennessee Illustrated: 1887**, p. 3. This book was contributed to the Weakley County Chamber of Commerce by Carmon L. Pritchett in March, 1971.
2. **Ibid.**, see also Roya Allen Billington, **The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860** (N. Y.: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 128.
3. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, September 14, 1923.
4. **The History of Tennessee Illustrated 1887**, p. 9.
5. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, September 14, 1923.
6. **Ibid.**
7. **Ibid.**, see also **The Martin Mail**, July 9, 1915.
8. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
9. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, July 9, September 14, 1923.
10. **Ibid.**
11. **1965 Pictorial Directory of Martin Church of Christ** and comments of Elder Henry C. Allison.
12. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
13. **The Martin Mail**, July 9, 1915.
14. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, September 14, 1923.
15. **The University of Tennessee at Martin Catalog, 1971-1972** (Martin: The University of Tennessee at Martin Press, 1971), pp. 15-19; see also **The Martin Mail**, July 16, 1915.
16. **The Martin Mail**, July 9, 1915; see also **the Banner of Truth** (Martin: The Church of Christ, January 30, 1972), p. 4.
17. Personal knowledge on the part of Henry C. Allison, elder, Neil Bowden, former treasurer of the church, and Lonnie E. Maness, chairman of the Missions Committee. See also **the Banner of Truth**, January 30, 1972, p. 2.
18. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
19. **Ibid.**
20. **Ibid.**
21. **Ibid.**
22. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**; see also **the Banner of Truth** (June 11, 1972); personal knowledge on the part of Neil Bowden, Henry C. Allison, Verna Cox, and Lonnie E. Maness.
23. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
24. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, September 14, 1923, section 7; also see **The Martin Mail**, July 9, 23, 1915.
25. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, September 14, 1923; see also Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
26. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
27. Personal knowledge on the part of Henry C. Allison, Neil Bowden, and Lonnie E. Maness. See also Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**.
28. Oxford Street Church of Christ **Membership Books**; also personal knowledge on the part of Neil Bowden, Henry C. Allison, Billy Newby, and Lonnie E. Maness.
29. **The Banner of Truth**, July 16, 1972, p. 2; also personal knowledge on the part of Henry C. Allison, Neil Bowden, and Lonnie E. Maness.